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Chapter 5

‘Friendship, Fellowship and Acceptance’: The Public Discourse of a Thriving Evangelical Congregation

Mathew Guest

Introduction

According to the ‘welcome cards’ distributed to newcomers, the Anglican church of St Michael-le-Belfrey, York¹ is

... a fellowship of Christian believers who believe seriously in the life-changing power of God’s mercy and truth. We are a church where you can experience friendship, fellowship and acceptance as we grow together in our love and commitment to Jesus Christ.

The language used here is telling: it reflects the church’s location in the evangelical tradition, while affirming a place for the relational and for power typical of the charismatic renewal movement. The fact that the church prints ‘welcome cards’ which are freely and deliberately distributed among interested visitors at Sunday services is also indicative of its passion for evangelism. A shared hope is that newcomers will convert and make their own commitment to Jesus. A further key emphasis is the notion of community – expressed here in the idea of ‘fellowship’. Members of the church enjoy a sense of collective unity and mutual care, which they invite newcomers to share upon entering into fellowship with the congregation.

The text of the ‘welcome card’ raises another issue. Aside from enjoying a common experience of friendship, acceptance and spiritual growth, what does it mean to be a member of St Michael’s? What do the congregants share that they see as legitimizing their place in the fellowship? Recent studies of evangelical churches have re-affirmed a long-standing emphasis upon theological correctness, usually grounded in scriptural authority and moral precept. Evangelical Christians express their identity and, in turn, recognize the

¹ This chapter is a development of research conducted as part of a doctoral thesis (Guest, 2002). As the identity of the church in question was given in that thesis – with the permission of the church leadership – and is therefore in the public realm, it is also given here.

identity of others, in terms of clear and exacting demands (Kelley, 1972). While 'commitment to Jesus' is mentioned on the welcome card, the leadership of St Michael's has chosen not to set alongside this a related set of expectations usually seen as central to a confession of faith by contemporary evangelical believers. There is no mention of judgement, for example, of scripture, of 'sound teaching' or even of salvation.

Commentators may dismiss this as a sign of astute marketing. Being ever more aware of their minority stake in a secular context, evangelical churches have become sensitive to the features of their message which are most offensive or off-putting to outsiders (Hunter, 1987). They 'soften' evangelism so as to stress positive affirmation and evade negative judgement. But if this is indicative of how the expression of belief is negotiated in relation to context and audience, this is a process that extends beyond Sunday welcome cards, and beyond the particulars of mission strategy. Indeed, the life of this congregation is shaped by a sensitivity to both the prejudices of outsiders *and* the tensions and diversity of its internal membership. While driven by the demands of evangelism, St Michael's has taken on these demands as requisite strategies for coping with its distinctive congregation. In this respect I proceed from the assumption that congregational identity is forged out of a negotiation of community boundaries (Cohen, 1985; Dowie, 2002). In the terms used in Chapter 1 of this volume, my approach is that of an 'intrinsic' study with contextualizing concerns, seeking to understand this congregation as a site for the negotiation of historical and cultural pressures (Briers, 1993; Stromberg, 1986).

This chapter draws from an extensive period of ethnographic fieldwork among the congregation of St Michael-le-Belfrey, conducted over twelve months during 1999–2000. Immersed participant observation over seven months was augmented by a series of semi-structured interviews with leaders and congregants. Shortly afterwards, I administered a detailed questionnaire survey of the congregation, charting attitudinal trends and patterns in participation. My initial aim was to explore degrees and patterns of accommodation to secular modernity within a shared evangelical worldview, as expressed in public meetings and group discourse. Research eventually exposed complex processes of negotiation, whereby shared values were forged and expressed in light of changing contexts and in dialogue with shared histories. This chapter explores these processes, focusing on how the distinctive history and constituency of the St Michael's congregation has generated a particular set of tensions, and on how the congregation has developed particular ways of dealing with them, notably through its public discourse. As a preface to this, it will be useful to trace the recent history of St Michael's in order to show how the pressures the congregation currently faces emerge from its achieved status as a centre of evangelical success.

Thriving on the Margins: The Case of St Michael-le-Belfrey

According to Al Dowie, '[Congregations] do not exist apart from their particularity, which in certain respects is like that of all others, like some

others, and like no other congregation' (Dowie, 2002, p. 65). While it exists firmly within the English evangelical Anglican tradition, and follows patterns of development seen elsewhere, it is often difficult not to treat St Michael-le-Belfrey as a unique case. It is tempting to regard the church as an epicentre of evangelical activity, the axial point from which innovations emanate – like ripples in a pond – into other churches across the country, churches which are keen to imitate their successful cousin. After all, St Michael's is known for having achieved what most English evangelical churches only dream of: exponential growth, a thriving tradition of worship, Christian drama and creative outreach, and a lasting fame that attracts evangelical pilgrims from across the nation and beyond, either as doting visitors or as newly committed members. Its pedigree status is also bound up in the figure of the late David Watson, who led the church as its minister from the mid-1960s until 1982. His numerous books and missions – which attracted a global audience – secure his place on the map of evangelical history. In turn, and by association, St Michael's has gained celebrity status, becoming well known as the site on which Watson put his radical teachings on discipleship, community and evangelism into concrete practice (see Saunders and Sansom, 1992; Watson, 1981, 1983).

While a part of the Church of England, St Michael's has been a thoroughgoing evangelical concern since David Watson's arrival. Since then it has followed a particular course of development, generally characterized by an increasing willingness to engage more positively with things outside of the evangelical world. This trend, driven by a passion for evangelism, has caused the shared outlook of the church to become gradually more inclusive, and in some respects more liberal. In this respect, it is worth citing H. Richard Niebuhr's famous argument that, as religious groups grow, they experience a transition from sect into denomination, the latter characterized by a greater accommodation to external forces. Niebuhr (1962) isolates three main pressures which drive this process: younger generations become less committed as they inherit rather than choose religious identity; increasing wealth and status makes worldly accommodation more likely; and the necessary development of a more formal leadership and organizational structure 'subverts the initial radical impetus' (Bruce, 2002, p. 24).

This pattern of development may, with some qualification, be mapped onto the history of St Michael-le-Belfrey. A moribund church was revitalized by a charismatic leader who attracted many new members. He introduced a charismatic evangelical model of faith and encouraged strong community ties which may be characterized as quasi-sectarian. (In the 1970s, for example, a number of church members committed to living communally, in what were known as 'households', and were supported by a common purse in order to free individuals for their ministry in the church.) Teaching was conservative and stressed the absolute authority of scripture. Participation was regular and extended outside Sunday worship, and the congregation was close-knit and interdependent. Subsequent years have seen a greater influx of middle-class congregants, a high turnover of members and several changes in leadership. St Michael's has increasingly engaged in dialogue with external agencies:

ecumenical initiatives, university links, local social aid projects and creative evangelism. The 1980s marked a peak in what members refer to as a great spiritual diversity, described by one former leader as a 'cord made of many strands': charismatic spirituality, the contemplative tradition, evangelical Bible teaching and social justice. Invoking a conception well entrenched among the congregation, she went on to comment that alone, each strand is weak, but bound together as a cord, they provide the elements necessary for a healthy church. Moreover, this eclectic vision of evangelical mission was complemented by an ethic of delegation which recognized and fostered the diverse gifts of the fellowship. The deep-seated entrenchment of this 'broad' vision – centred on eclecticism and lay empowerment – was made apparent when a more narrowly defined agenda was championed by new leadership in the early 1990s. When a fresh incumbent introduced reforms which prioritized the performance of charismatic gifts, re-centralized leadership structures, and marginalized women, this provoked dissonance throughout the congregation. However, recent developments suggest something of a return to a 'broad' agenda comparable to that which was dominant in the 1980s. This set the tone of congregational life around the time of my fieldwork; the affable presence of the recently appointed vicar was interpreted in terms of a return to things lost. The new incumbent was returning, according to one member, 'to a much more open approach to different spiritualities...while being very strongly in the evangelical charismatic [tradition]...'.

At the time of fieldwork, there was evidence that this 'broad' vision of evangelical spirituality was both embraced and understood by many within the fellowship. According to one of the lay preachers, one could explain the persistent popularity of St Michael's with reference to four factors: the sense of love and acceptance in the place, the contemporaneousness of its worship, good teaching, and its inclusivity, expressed most vividly in its attempts to be culturally relevant. However, while many favoured this 'open', inclusive vision, some criticized it as a capitulation to liberal trends in wider British culture, lamenting a loss of focus and yearning for a more directive leadership. One member even suggested that St Michael's is no longer a truly evangelical church, preferring to see it as 'liberal charismatic'. While internal views may be placed along a spectrum in between these two extremes, both are premised on an observation of the same trends in current congregational life: a pervasive return to a vision of Christianity characterized as broad, open and inclusive. And while the use of these words may be ambiguous, their positive invocation in an evangelical context signals both significant change and intentional accommodation.

The peculiar history of St Michael's has, in part, shaped its present congregational constituency. For example, David Watson was apparently attracted to St Michael's because its location within the York city centre – busy and popular with tourists – has obvious advantages for evangelism. However, because of this geographical peculiarity, it has no parish as such, at least not one that is home to its committed membership. In the year 2000, there were 365 people on the church electoral roll, but only 6 of them lived within the parish

boundaries. In this sense the congregation is a 'gathered' one, embodying a distinction between 'membership' and locality.

The fact of geographical dispersion is also reflected in survey data, which suggested that only 21 per cent of the present congregation live in the city centre, with nearly 18 per cent living more than five miles away. One of the clergy claimed that regular congregants travel from within a 20-mile radius of the church building, and the address list reflects this, listing residents of Malton, Selby and Harrogate. Moreover, geographical dispersion is matched by a high turnover. Over 10 per cent of the congregation have been regularly attending for less than twelve months, and another 24 per cent have attended for less than five years. Many congregants are newcomers to the area, whose jobs may also take them on to new locations in the not so distant future. Effective university links also ensure a constant flow of undergraduate attendees, who make up 30 per cent of the regular congregational body. Unsurprisingly, geographical mobility is matched and driven by economic advantage, the current congregation being disproportionately middle class. Many of the 700 or so listed on the church address list work in the service professions as managers, teachers or civil servants, and, according to survey data, a massive 70 per cent have either passed through or are currently engaged in higher education.

St Michael's appears to incorporate a high proportion (perhaps 40 or 50 per cent if one includes students) of what some sociologists have called 'elective parochials', those who forge temporary community attachments by affiliating themselves to local institutions, such as the church. American sociologists have argued that this mode of affiliation is a consequence of social uprootedness and increased social and geographical mobility (Tipton, 1982; Warner, 1988). In the UK, it has emerged alongside the growth of the 'megachurches', which are popular among middle-class evangelicals who are mobile and whose local allegiance is often a temporary one (Hunt, 1997). The most significant consequence of this arrangement within St Michael's concerns an attenuation of commitment. Many congregants are unable or unwilling to engage in church involvement that makes demands on time outside of Sunday worship. Others restrict their membership to a part-time, partial or occasional basis (for example, 24 per cent of the congregation claim regularly to attend another church in addition to St Michael's). The entire picture is one of a church which continues to affirm the importance of radical Christian commitment – of the practically demanding nature of Christian living – but which only appears to elicit such high levels of commitment within its own structures among a limited segment of its membership. The problem was identified by one of the St Michael's clergy interviewed during my fieldwork:

St Michael's is a great place. There is a lot going for it. But, it isn't what you might call a real... church... because we have an eclectic congregation. It comes in, it listens to what it wants to listen [to], it puts into practice what it wants to put into practice, and the rest is thrown out. Because, we don't see one another from week to week. We meet on a Sunday, have a great time, and then we go into our worlds, and we meet again on Sunday. Don't we have community?

If a sense of unity within St Michael's is compromised because of its scale and because of the demography of its congregation, this is also not helped by a significant diversity of belief among congregants themselves. The 'diversity of spirituality' celebrated in the 1980s has persisted in a diversity of faith perspectives among its membership. For example, while many would identify themselves as 'evangelical', there is no clear consensus on what this term might mean. For some it signifies a style of Christianity that is thoroughly Bible-centred, obedient to the truth of scripture and uncompromising on biblical moral precepts. Others affirm a passion for the texts, but a more creative approach to their interpretation, some emphasizing inclusivism over more traditionalist ethics, mirrored in a focus upon Jesus over Paul. Some more cynical parishioners latch onto these as negative features, 'evangelical' being used as a pejorative label for a pushy or unreasonably narrow kind of Christianity. There is also a disparity between members who embrace a charismatic worldview, and those who view such things with suspicion, preferring to rely on scripture rather than on what they see as personal sentiment. In this way the notion of being 'evangelical' incorporates personal and collective meanings, positive and negative associations, all shaped by past experiences and present concerns. It is very much a 'contested' term (Baumann, 1996), its meanings open to question and challenge from within the congregation itself. Put another way, while the congregation is united by a common set of symbolic boundaries, members relate differentially to the symbolic resources available to them (Cohen, 1985).

To summarize thus far, we may shed light on the accommodating strategy expressed on the church welcome cards by referring to two related factors. First, an inclusive vision of evangelical identity is built into the history of the church itself, and has been recently revived as a focus of celebration in popular memory. Second, the current demography of the congregation suggests a lack of stability, causing leaders to maintain a persistent focus upon flow from the outside, upon levels of attendance and comparative levels of enthusiasm. The first instance points to an accommodation to established internal expectations, the second to an acclimatization to predicted tensions at the margins of the church fellowship. But if this accommodating strategy is a shaping feature of congregational life, how does it feed back into expressions of congregational identity? Insights into this process can be gained by examining the public discourse of the congregation: its identity as expressed in communal and public gatherings.

The Negotiation of Boundaries Through Public Discourse

Partly inspired by Michel Foucault's (1977, 1984) seminal work on power, some recent studies of evangelicalism have focused on 'discourse' as a shaping constituent of the evangelical worldview (Boone, 1989; Brown, 2001). My own concern is more specific, and the discourse I am referring to approximates to what Penny Becker has called the identity of a community publicly symbolized (Becker, 1999, p. 90). Expressed each week in the St Michael's Sunday services,

the public discourse of the congregation amounts to the entirety of its public self-presentation. It serves as a kind of mirror in which the congregation also sees itself and through which it forges a collective self-image. Echoing Peter Collins's chapter in this volume (Chapter 7), I am in this sense interested in the narratives which the congregation both produces and tells itself. This is an especially important source of identity here because of the scale of St Michael's; while organizationally complex, Sunday services are the only context in which large segments of the congregation gather for a common experience. While discernible in prayer, prophecy and other forms of public address, this discourse is most clearly expressed in Sunday sermons, which I take as an illustrative example. My key observation may be summarized in the claim that *St Michael's is held together by a discourse which accommodates its various schools of belief while also controlling public utterance so that conflict is avoided*.

During fieldwork, I listened to forty-nine sermons at St Michael's, delivered by various preachers at the morning, family and evening services each Sunday. I took detailed notes on each of them, either during or after the event, and many were also made available to me as cassette recordings. Although they purported to focus on numerous topics – sometimes dictated by the readings suggested in the Church of England's *Common Lectionary* – subsequent analysis has revealed a tendency to focus on certain issues on a regular basis, and with the same key emphases. Central to the majority of sermons were three main areas of concern: universal sin, conversionism and the reformed Christian life. I take these in turn.

First, there was a continual emphasis upon a vision of humankind that was both uniform and thoroughly negative. As the vicar preached on one occasion, humans are basically all the same and are typified by misery and a tendency to fail. Attending Sunday services, I was repeatedly struck by the emphasis upon the inevitability of sin and wretchedness, which was stressed in in-house versions of the liturgical confession as well as by preachers and in prayer. This stress on the negativity of mankind is a natural accompaniment to substitutionary atonement, which is its theological resolution. It is because we are fallen that we need to be saved. But the stress on sin and confession extended beyond the logic of shared theologies. It also fostered what Stephen Warner has called a 'culture of public humbling', that is, a readiness to express a mutual neediness which opens the way for religious exchange and mutual support within the fellowship (Warner, 1988, pp. 293–294). This sense of humility was repeatedly stressed by the vicar, whose claims to being a normal 'sinner' were an effective levelling device, his parishioners often remarking on how reassured they felt that he was as imperfect as they were.

Second, sermons were ridden with a repeated call to faith and to repentance, emphasizing the need for parishioners to base their lives 'entirely on Jesus' and to accept and embrace the Holy Spirit. In David Bebbington's terms, there was an overwhelming focus upon conversionism (Bebbington, 1989). This was rather curious in one respect, as sermons often evoked the style of a revivalist altar call rather than an ongoing body of teaching, steered towards the nurturing of an established parish community. However, it may be the case

that preachers were responding to the demography of the congregation, outlined in the previous section. It is possible that 'elective parochials' and visitors were kept firmly in mind, so that preaching retained an evangelistic urgency. If this is the case, then it is significant that the needs of one cohort were clearly prioritized and used to frame the public discourse as a whole. Moreover, this appeared to be a norm which was accepted without protest by the congregation. Congregants seemed perfectly happy to hear the same message of faith and repentance each week, and while this may be explained with reference to the emotive draw of sung worship and charismatic gifts, many attendees also shared a common commitment to the importance of foregrounding conversionist motifs on a weekly basis, for the benefit of passing visitors.

Invoking a call to convert and turn to Christ, sermons also addressed the practical consequences of identity change: the reformed Christian life. This formed a large part of public teaching, and preachers always found room to emphasize the importance of prayer, financial giving, reaching out to the needy, embracing charismatic gifts and developing our God-given gifts. What was striking about their presentation was the imprecise way in which they were dealt with. For example, one morning sermon was concluded with a call for us all to embrace the Holy Spirit in our lives. The preacher then went on to say that he was not going to define what this meant, but that we should put this idea into practice ourselves and find out that way. The common teaching on financial giving was that, although important, it was not a 'Gospel issue' and should be left up to the conscience of the individual. In the words of Peter Stromberg, who encountered a similar phenomenon at Immanuel Church in Stockholm, teaching was characterized by 'an impassioned plea to act without saying what to do' (Stromberg, 1986, p. 47). In sum, while congregants were implored to follow a devoted, Spirit-filled life of prayer, sacrifice and neighbourly love, preachers left these ideas in such a vague and malleable form that they could easily be moulded to fit the existing everyday lives of the average member. From this angle, a radical challenge can amount to mild accommodation.

Foucault makes the claim that discourses are interesting not only for their content, but also for what they exclude from public utterance (Foucault, 1984). Similarly, sermons in St Michael's may be analysed not only in terms of what they cover but also in terms of what they avoid or fail to comment upon. One notable omission from sermons – and from all public discourse in fact – was moral teaching. This was especially striking, considering the usual emphasis that evangelical churches place upon correct Christian living and ethical integrity. Of all forty-nine sermons analysed, I found only three clear references to moral issues that also offered a clear judgement upon them. Other references were largely incorporated into narratives communicating a different message, so that, for example, issues such as abortion were mentioned but left without moral comment. On other occasions, a sense of moral prescription was implied, but not concretized, as in one preacher's comment that the Bible is a good source of reproof and correction, as well as guidance. What he failed to point out were the actions identified in the Bible as worthy of reproof. More

emphasis was placed throughout on positive qualities like love, care and responsibility. On the rare occasions when a preacher isolated particular qualities as morally wrong, the solution suggested was not behavioural reform as such, but an openness to the Holy Spirit in the same vague vein discussed earlier. In short, sermons were characterized by both an evasion of moral issues and by a tendency to avoid offering specific moral prescriptions and sanctions. As with teachings on the 'Christian life', advice was more often than not vague, malleable and open to interpretation.

The lack of clear moral instruction within the public discourse of St Michael's is especially curious as, according to survey data, individual members express highly conservative views on personal moral conduct, especially on sexual morality. According to questionnaire returns, 81 per cent think that homosexual relations between consenting adults are 'always wrong', while the figures are 90 per cent for adultery and 73 per cent for premarital sex. Sixty-seven per cent feel the same about drinking to excess, and 64 per cent about the use of profanity. Moreover, the overwhelming majority also feel that the church *should* speak out on moral issues, ranging from issues of personal conduct to national politics. What we are faced with is a separation of public and private discourses, the first characterized by a general tolerance and the second by a rather strict moral economy. Furthermore, the fact that 76 per cent of the congregation also claim that St Michael's Sunday sermons adequately cover moral teaching suggests that parishioners are, on the whole, satisfied with this arrangement. One explanation of this would be that such moral teaching is so well entrenched among the congregation that there is no perceived need for it to be taught. However, the fact that preachers clearly cater to 'elective parochials' (most clearly evident in the 'altar call' style of preaching, described earlier) suggests that they feel a need to repeatedly address core aspects of the faith life.

I would rather argue that the reason moral judgement and prescription are avoided relates to the need to accommodate the liberal diversity that is recognized as existing within the congregation. Public discourses have been shaped around the perceived attitudes and composition of the St Michael's membership. This is a sustainable arrangement because of the long-standing set of preachers who are well acquainted with church members. For example, while the church has had four incumbents and numerous attached ministers over the last thirty years, all of the lay preachers are long-standing members, some appointed as elders during the late 1960s and 1970s. It could be argued that they very much steer the style and tone of public teaching, in response to congregational needs and, for the most part, informed by a broad vision of evangelicalism associated with the heyday of the late 1970s and early 1980s.

There appears to be a collective requirement for a shared public discourse which underplays issues likely to provoke conflict or divide the congregation. In practice, of course, this means that certain concerns are effectively privatized, as there is no room for their expression in the public realm. Indeed, in some respects the very subject of personal belief is ushered into the private realm, something at least suggested by the church's reluctance to issue a collective statement of belief. Any public statements of the church's identity –

such as the welcome card ‘blurb’ quoted at the beginning of this chapter – are notable for their inclusive and affirmative tone. While ethnographic study revealed areas of conservatism, such convictions were notable for their expression within private or small group contexts, such as questionnaire returns or closed conversations among friends.

But if a privatization trend is evident, then it is a selective one, forcing some issues into the private sphere while locating others in public discourse. Investigation of the shared values of the congregation, drawing from a variety of sources, revealed a curious pattern. Public teaching presents itself as a mixture of hard, traditionalist doctrine and soft, ambiguous or non-judgemental commentary that hints at a more tolerant outlook. Public discourse avoids moral issues, affirms a generalized, undefined picture of the faith life, and retains an emphasis on accommodating to diversity within the group. But it also stresses sin, the moral depravity of secular modernity, and the radical difference between those inside and those outside of the faith. Conversely, privately expressed convictions downplay notions of hell and punishment for non-Christians, and suggest unease with strong boundaries between the saved and unsaved. At the same time, they reflect a thoroughly conservative take on moral issues, especially on sexual matters (see Figure 5.1).

SCRIPTURE AS FOUNDATIONAL AUTHORITY

(Drawn from according to context)

Private Discourses

Public Discourses

Ambiguous anthropology

Conservative anthropology

Conservative morality

Inclusive, affirmative morality

Figure 5.1 Selective privatization among the St Michael’s congregation.

In summary, while aspects of the shared evangelical worldview held within St Michael’s are to some degree liberalized, this process has become subject to a certain selectivity, by topic as well as by context. Divergent emphases can be found in public and in private discourses. Of course, expressions of belief are inevitably shaped by contextual factors, and changing contextual needs generate significant variations in the kind of claims individuals make (Stringer, 1996). But these variations are not random, and the patterns described above suggest an ordered system, whereby certain issues are privatized and others dominate public exchange. I would argue that this system has become infused into the shared culture of St Michael’s as a method for the avoidance of in-group conflict and maintenance of a sense of united community. Moreover, this is conveyed and sustained through public discourse.

Put another way, the boundaries of the group have come to coalesce around a set of ideas which encompasses both liberal (open, broad and tolerant) and conservative (narrow, exclusivist) camps, holding each in a delicate balance while attempting to compromise neither. Fracture or conflict occurs, not when members disagree with this general discourse as such, but when they *openly* endorse one pole of the tension at the expense of the other, and in so doing dissolve the delicate separation of public and private discourses. Hence it is a kind of tension – and its propensity to hold conflict at bay – that generates unity, and which consolidates the boundaries of congregational identity.

A glance at the history of St Michael's suggests that this pattern may have been entrenched within congregational culture for some time, as key moments of fracture have occurred only when it has been challenged. In the early 1980s, under the influence of American Restorationists, a splinter group broke away from the church because of disagreements over women's leadership and the authority of charismatic prophecy. In the mid-1990s, a new incumbent introduced a similarly narrow vision of Christianity, based around a supernaturalist theology, a conservative take on ethics and gender roles, and a paternalistic approach to leadership. On both occasions, a narrow, directive – almost exclusively charismatic – theology was rejected by the congregational majority, protest becoming mobilized in significant disinvolvement. Extremes of the liberal kind are unsurprisingly less common, although the *Visions* group may be seen as an example. *Visions* are a progressive, 'alternative' worship group attached to St Michael's. They have established themselves as a separate initiative with their own services and home group meetings, and advocate an understanding of evangelical faith based on environmental and social justice, and the need to retain authenticity in a postmodern world. Some of the St Michael's members cannot relate to their multi-media worship as church, and see its experimentalism as objectionable and misplaced. In this sense, *Visions* endorse an openness to change and diversity that is seen by some parishioners as excessively liberal. While they are not openly denounced and have not been ejected from the fellowship, they are certainly distanced and treated with some caution. It is developments such as these, which challenge the dominant tension of conservative and liberal convictions, that render the boundaries of the congregation most clearly visible (Douglas, 1966). Moreover, it is by engaging in an ongoing conversation with its rich past that the congregation is continually reminded of the propensity of such moments to cause conflict and threaten the cohesion of the church (Wuthnow, 1998, p. 12).

Concluding Remarks

The dominance of the secularization thesis has caused sociological interest to gravitate towards things marginal, exceptional and novel (Gill, 1992, p. 90). If comment is passed upon mainstream churches, it is most often that they are depressed and in decline, or else about to become so. And while exceptions to this dubious 'rule' are acknowledged, they are rarely taken as exemplars from which we can learn about wider trends. But to what extent is St Michael's a

part of broader movements? In terms of scale and the richness of its congregational culture, there are certainly few churches like it. Astute insiders may cite the examples of St Aldates, Oxford, or Holy Trinity, Brompton – the famous home of the Alpha Course – charismatic evangelical churches which have enjoyed large and committed congregations since the 1960s (Hastings, 1991, p. 615). We might add the Pentecostalist ‘megachurches’, centres of piety in the urban metropolis such as Kensington Temple or centres of the Vineyard Church (Hunt, 1997), which have gained ground in subsequent years. Often either theologically infused or financially sponsored by American evangelical groups, these signify an emerging trend, though the globalizing forces which fuel them enjoy only limited currency in the UK context (see Chapter 3).

While this case study appears particularistic, it does generate insights which may shed light on the construction of congregational cultures in other contexts, not least those ‘thriving’ centres mentioned above. Indeed, the return to a ‘broad’ agenda within St Michael’s may be seen as reflecting a more general shift among evangelicals towards cultural accommodation and ecclesiological innovation, emergent partly as a backlash against the Toronto Blessing and the emotionally intensive ‘third wave’ of charismatic renewal (Hall, 1994; Tomlinson, 1995). But what may be learned from this case study for the broader field of congregational studies? First, the case of St Michael’s reminds us that beliefs and values are often heterogeneous, even within so-called ‘evangelical’ congregations. It is tempting to assume that churches identified as ‘strict’ or ‘conservative’ elicit an equally strong commitment to public teaching across the congregation. The public face of evangelicalism has a complex relationship to its expression in private spheres, which often suggests a diversity and individualism that sit uncomfortably with neat presuppositions about evangelical understandings of truth and knowledge. A similar point can be made about power. Even within congregations that align themselves with conservative traditions such as evangelicalism, power is negotiated rather than simply imposed. Congregations are characterized by a ‘negotiated order’ (Fine, 1984), and congregational studies need to adopt multi-focused methods in order to explore patterns in the construction and distribution of religious authority.

Second, the teaching imparted and learned within congregations may be understood in part as a response to the specific circumstances of that community. Penny Becker has warned against idiosyncratic readings of congregations, favouring the use of the institutional lens as a reminder of the factors that bind congregations of the same denomination (Becker, 1999). But an equally serious mistake is to infer creedal uniformity on the basis of church style or churchmanship, an error often inflicted upon evangelical churches because they are an easy target for popular stereotypes and cynical parody. While institutional forms are important, local histories cannot be overlooked. Indeed, an examination of inherited traditions can – as in this case – provide the essential key to understanding the peculiarities of congregational life.

Finally, St Michael’s is testament to what might be called ‘the myth of evangelical success’ as a pressurizing factor that shapes the shared expectations

of those who choose to remain within such churches. To be a 'successful' church in popular evangelical terms is to be numerous, active and to elicit practical commitment, and this is essential to the identity of the congregation as conceived by its members. When the appearance of these indicators is compromised, the legitimacy of the church is on one level called into question. Hence measures arise that seek to suppress forces which have previously provoked disinvolvement and curbed enthusiasm. For example, while a 'hard' conservative public discourse may be an emblem of evangelical identity for some, it is a threat to existing unity and cohesion for others, and thus also a threat to those indicators which are such an important signal of the evangelical legitimacy of the church, that is, a populace and active congregation. Moreover, unity is an especially poignant issue for those 'elective parochials' who perhaps depend upon the church for a sense of belonging, intimacy and collective support. With a premium placed on the role of the congregation as a close-knit support network, albeit a temporary one for some participants, it is of no surprise that interpersonal conflict is avoided and that measures are taken to minimize its occurrence. 'Friendship, fellowship and acceptance' are not merely bywords for evangelical community: they are emblems of cohesion and tools for securing a shared image of harmony and success.

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